

Transformational Leadership in Enhancing Public Service Quality in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to analyze the role of transformational leadership in improving the quality of public services in the digital era. It examines how transformational leadership supports digital transformation, service innovation, and citizen-oriented public service delivery.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a qualitative approach with an interpretative case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations involving purposively selected civil servants (ASN) at a local government agency in Makassar City. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings – The findings reveal that transformational leadership enhances public service quality by fostering a digital transformation vision, encouraging service innovation, and promoting more responsive and citizen-oriented behaviors among public officials. It also creates a work environment that is adaptive to technological change. However, its implementation is constrained by limited digital competencies, resistance to change, and technical challenges in digital service systems.

Originality/Value – This study highlights transformational leadership as a critical driver of public service quality in the digital era. It contributes to the public administration literature by emphasizing the importance of integrating leadership, human resource capacity development, and digital infrastructure to achieve sustainable, citizen-centered public services.

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of information and communication technology has brought fundamental changes in various aspects of life, including the system of public service delivery. The digital era has not only transformed how citizens access services but has also reshaped their expectations regarding service quality provided by the government. Citizens now demand services that are fast, transparent, easily accessible, and supported by integrated digital technologies. In this context, governments are required to undertake digital transformation through the implementation of e-government and digital governance to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. The United Nations (2022) emphasizes that digital transformation is a key indicator in achieving a modern, inclusive, and responsive government.

However, various studies indicate that the implementation of digital transformation in public services still faces complex challenges. Heeks (2006) argues that many e-government projects fail due to a gap between system design and real conditions in the field. Furthermore, Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug (2019) state that digital transformation is often hindered by internal organizational factors, such as limited human resource capacity, resistance to change, and weak innovation culture. Dwivedi et al. (2019) also find that major challenges in public service digitalization include lack of system integration, low digital literacy among public officials, and disparities in technological infrastructure across regions. These conditions indicate that digital transformation is not merely a technological issue, but also a managerial and leadership challenge.

From a public administration perspective, leadership plays a highly strategic role in determining organizational success, particularly in responding to changes in the digital era. Leadership functions not only as a decision-making mechanism but also as a driver of change, a shaper of organizational culture, and a determinant of public service policy direction. Northouse (2016) defines leadership as a process of influencing individuals or groups to achieve common goals. In the context of public services, these goals relate to improving service quality to meet citizens' needs and expectations.

In facing complex and dynamic changes, public organizations require leadership models that are adaptive, innovative, and capable of driving sustainable transformation. One leadership approach considered relevant is transformational leadership. Bass and Avolio (1994) explain that transformational leadership can inspire, motivate, and drive change through a clear vision, attention to individual needs, and intellectual stimulation. Transformational leaders focus not only on achieving organizational targets but also on developing individual capacities and fostering an innovative work culture.

Several studies show that transformational leadership has a significant influence on public sector performance. Wright and Pandey (2010) found that transformational leadership enhances employee motivation and commitment in public organizations. Trottier, Van Wart, and Wang (2008) also demonstrate that transformational leadership improves organizational effectiveness through strong vision communication and employee empowerment. Furthermore, Van Wart et al. (2017) emphasize that in the digital era, public leaders are required to integrate technology with public service values such as transparency, accountability, and responsiveness.

To further illustrate the relationship between transformational leadership and public service quality in the digital era, the conceptual model can be seen in the following figure.

Figure 1. Transformational Leadership Model in Enhancing Public Service Quality in the Digital Era



Source: Developed by the researcher (2026)

The figure illustrates that transformational leadership serves as the main driver of digital organizational transformation. This transformation encompasses not only technological aspects but also changes in work culture and the mindset of public officials. These changes subsequently influence officials' behavior in delivering services, ultimately impacting the improvement of public service quality as well as public trust.

In the context of public service quality, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) argue that service quality is determined by the dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. In the digital era, these dimensions have expanded, where service speed, ease of access, and system reliability become key factors in determining public satisfaction (Alawneh et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2009). However, Osborne, Radnor, and Nasi

(2013) note that public service quality still faces various challenges, such as lack of innovation, low responsiveness, and weak interaction between public officials and citizens.

These conditions indicate a gap between the ideal conditions suggested by theory and the realities observed in practice. This comparison can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Comparison of Leadership and Public Service Quality in the Digital Era

No	Aspect	Ideal Condition (Theory)	Reality in Practice
1	Leadership	Transformational, innovative, visionary	Still bureaucratic and less adaptive
2	Digitalization	Integrated and efficient	Uneven and not yet optimal
3	Public Officials	Responsive and adaptive	Resistance to change still exists
4	Service Delivery	Fast, transparent, responsive	Still slow and less responsive
5	Public Satisfaction	High and sustainable	Still fluctuating

Source: Processed by the researcher (2026)

The table shows that digital transformation in public services has not been fully accompanied by adaptive and innovative leadership transformation. The mismatch between ideal conditions and practical realities indicates that changes remain partial, where technological aspects develop faster than changes in human resources and organizational leadership. This condition suggests that digitalization in public services has not yet been able to produce optimal service quality, as it is not fully supported by leadership capable of managing change comprehensively and sustainably.

Furthermore, the persistence of bureaucratic leadership patterns indicates that traditional leadership styles still dominate public organizations. These patterns are characterized by rigid approaches, procedure-oriented practices, and limited space for innovation and creativity among public officials. As a result, although technology has been adopted, its utilization remains suboptimal due to the lack of corresponding changes in work culture and mindset. This highlights that digital transformation requires not only system changes but also a shift toward more flexible, adaptive, and visionary leadership paradigms.

In addition, the uneven and suboptimal digitalization reflects disparities in the implementation of technology within the public sector. These gaps may be caused by factors such as limited infrastructure, lack of system integration, and insufficient human resource capacity in operating technology. This condition directly affects service quality, where services are still not fully fast, responsive, and efficient as expected in modern public service concepts. From the perspective of public officials, the presence of resistance to change indicates that organizational transformation faces not only technical challenges but also psychological and cultural barriers. Officials accustomed to conventional work systems tend to struggle in adapting to digital systems that require speed, accuracy, and openness to innovation. This suggests that organizational change requires continuous learning processes, as well as leadership support capable of building awareness and readiness among officials to face change.

Moreover, service conditions that remain slow and less responsive indicate that digitalization has not fully improved the quality of interaction between public officials and citizens. Although technology has been implemented, service quality is still highly influenced by the

behavior of officials in delivering services. This shows that public service quality is determined not only by technological systems but also by human factors as service providers.

The fluctuating level of public satisfaction also indicates that citizens have not fully experienced the benefits of digital transformation in public services. This may be due to a mismatch between public expectations and the services provided. In the digital era, citizens have higher expectations regarding service quality, requiring public organizations to deliver services that are faster, more accessible, and more transparent.

These findings reinforce the view that the main issues in public service delivery in the digital era are not solely technological but also relate to leadership capability in managing organizational change. Andrews, Boyne, and Walker (2011) emphasize that public organizational performance is strongly influenced by leadership quality in directing and managing organizational resources. Effective leadership is able to integrate various resources, including technology and human resources, to achieve organizational goals.

Furthermore, Kane et al. (2015) show that the success of digital transformation depends largely on leadership that can foster an innovation culture and encourage effective use of technology. Leaders who fail to manage change strategically tend to produce only technical transformation without significantly improving service quality. Therefore, transformational leadership becomes crucial in ensuring that digitalization is not merely a tool but also a means of creating value in public services.

Additionally, the limited number of studies specifically examining the relationship between transformational leadership and public service quality in the digital era indicates a research gap. Most previous studies have focused more on technological aspects or general organizational performance, thus lacking a deeper explanation of how leadership integrates digital transformation with improvements in public service quality. This highlights the need for further research, particularly in the context of local government.

Thus, it can be understood that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in improving public service quality in the digital era. Leadership that is able to inspire, motivate, and drive innovation will be more effective in managing organizational change and enhancing service quality. However, its implementation still faces various challenges, including those related to human resources, organizational culture, and technological infrastructure.

Therefore, this study is important to further examine how transformational leadership can drive organizational change, improve public service quality, and respond to increasingly complex and dynamic societal demands in the digital era. This research is expected to contribute not only to the theoretical development of public administration but also to provide practical insights for government organizations in formulating effective leadership strategies to improve public service quality.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretative case study design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of transformational leadership in improving public service quality in the digital era. A qualitative approach is chosen because the study focuses on exploring meanings, experiences, and social dynamics within public organizations. Yin (2018) states that case studies are used to understand phenomena in depth within real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. In addition, Merriam (2009) emphasizes that qualitative research enables

researchers to comprehensively understand processes, meanings, and participants' perspectives.

This research was conducted in a local government agency in Makassar City, Central Sulawesi Province, which has implemented a digital-based public service system. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that the agency is undergoing a digital transformation process, making it relevant to examine how transformational leadership contributes to improving service quality. The research subjects were civil servants (ASN) directly involved in public service delivery, both at the managerial and operational levels.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling in qualitative research is used to select individuals who possess knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under study. The informants in this research were chosen based on their involvement in digital public services, work experience, and understanding of leadership practices within the organization.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore informants' experiences, perceptions, and understandings related to transformational leadership and public service quality. Rubin and Rubin (2012) state that in-depth interviews allow researchers to gain rich and detailed insights into participants' social experiences. In addition, participant observation was conducted to directly understand public service practices and interactions between public officials and citizens in real-life contexts. Kawulich (2005) notes that observation in qualitative research enables researchers to capture phenomena that may not be fully revealed through interviews.

Data analysis in this study employed thematic analysis. The analysis process involved several stages, including data familiarization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation of meanings derived from the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Furthermore, Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012) emphasize that thematic analysis enables researchers to systematically organize data to produce in-depth findings.

To ensure data validity, this study applies the concept of trustworthiness, which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through technique triangulation by comparing interview data with observational findings. In addition, member checking was conducted to ensure the alignment between the researcher's interpretations and the informants' experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that trustworthiness is a key criterion in assessing the quality of qualitative research. Shenton (2004) also emphasizes that validation techniques such as triangulation and member checking enhance the credibility of research findings.

Thus, this research method is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how transformational leadership contributes to improving public service quality in the digital era, as well as how this process occurs within the real context of public organizations.

3. Result and Discussion

Result

The findings of this study were obtained through in-depth interviews and observations of civil servants (ASN) in a local government agency in Makassar City that has implemented a digital-based public service system. Overall, the results indicate that transformational leadership

plays an important role in improving public service quality in the digital era. This role is evident not only in policy aspects but also in changes in mindset, employee behavior, and the dynamics of service implementation in practice.

The first finding shows that transformational leadership plays a role in building a vision for change oriented toward the digitalization of public services. Leaders not only provide formal directives but also actively instill an understanding among employees about the importance of digital transformation in improving service quality. This is reflected in the consistency of leadership communication across various organizational forums. As stated by one informant: "Our leader always emphasizes that services must now follow technological developments. So we can no longer work manually as we used to." (Informant 1)

This statement indicates that leadership functions as the primary driver in transforming employees' mindsets from conventional systems to digital systems. This process does not occur instantly but through continuous internalization via organizational communication. Another informant also emphasized:

"In every meeting, the leader reminds us that services must be fast and digital-based so that the public does not face difficulties." (Informant 2)

This shows that transformational leadership extends beyond formulating a vision to continuously internalizing values of change among all members of the organization.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that transformational leadership plays a role in encouraging innovation in public service delivery. Leaders provide opportunities for employees to develop new ideas to improve service quality, particularly through the use of digital technology. In practice, employees have begun to develop various service innovations, such as online service systems and simple applications to accelerate administrative processes. As expressed by an informant:

"The leader gives us the freedom to innovate, for example by creating online service systems or simple applications to make things easier for the public." (Informant 3)

However, field findings also show that not all employees are able to adapt quickly to these changes. Some still experience difficulties in using digital technology, indicating a gap in competencies. As stated by another informant:

"Not all employees can immediately adapt to the changes; some still struggle with digital systems." (Informant 4)

This condition suggests that although leadership encourages innovation, its successful implementation depends heavily on the readiness of human resources within the organization.

Moreover, the study reveals changes in employee behavior in delivering public services. Transformational leadership encourages employees to become more responsive, communicative, and oriented toward citizens' needs. Employees no longer focus solely on administrative completion but also on the quality of interaction with the public. This is reflected in changes in service attitudes, as expressed by an informant:

"Now we are required to respond more quickly to the public, especially those using online services." (Informant 2)

In addition, employees have begun to demonstrate more empathetic attitudes in interacting with the public:

"We are taught to be more friendly and helpful, not just to complete administrative tasks." (Informant 1)

However, these behavioral changes are not yet evenly distributed. Some employees have not fully adapted to the demands of digital-based services, particularly in terms of responsiveness and technological proficiency.

From the perspective of public service quality, the findings indicate improvements, particularly in terms of accessibility and service speed. The implementation of digital systems enables citizens to access services without physically visiting the office, thereby reducing waiting time and improving efficiency. As stated by an informant:

“With the online system, people can manage administrative matters more easily without having to wait in long queues.” (Informant 3)

Nevertheless, service quality is not yet fully optimal. Several challenges remain, such as system disruptions and limited employee capability in operating technology. One informant stated:

“Sometimes the system crashes, which delays services. Also, some employees are still not familiar with digital systems.” (Informant 4)

These findings indicate that improving public service quality in the digital era depends not only on technological systems but also on overall organizational readiness.

In addition, this study identifies several challenges in the implementation of transformational leadership. One major challenge is resistance to change, where some employees remain comfortable with conventional work systems. As expressed by an informant:

“Change is not easy; some employees are still comfortable with the old ways, so it takes time to adjust.” (Informant 2)

Beyond individual factors, limitations in facilities and infrastructure also pose obstacles to digital service implementation. This condition indicates that digital transformation requires comprehensive support, including leadership, human resources, and supporting infrastructure.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that transformational leadership plays a significant role in improving public service quality in the digital era through vision development, innovation encouragement, and behavioral change among employees. However, the process still faces various challenges that affect the optimization of service quality, indicating the need for more systematic efforts to integrate leadership, technology, and organizational readiness.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that transformational leadership plays a significant role in improving public service quality in the digital era, particularly through the development of organizational vision, the encouragement of innovation, and changes in employee behavior. These findings suggest that the success of digital transformation in public services depends not only on technology but also on leadership capacity in managing organizational change. First, the role of leadership in building a digital transformation vision shows that leaders act as change agents capable of directing organizations toward more modern service systems. This finding is consistent with transformational leadership theory proposed by Bass and Avolio (1994), which emphasizes the importance of vision, inspiration, and communication in driving organizational change. In this context, the consistency of leaders in communicating the direction of change reflects the dimension of inspirational motivation, where leaders instill shared goals among employees. Wright and Pandey (2010) also demonstrate that transformational leadership enhances employee commitment through strong vision communication, making organizations more prepared to face change.

Furthermore, the findings regarding the encouragement of public service innovation indicate that transformational leadership plays a role in creating a work environment that supports creativity and the development of new ideas. This aligns with the concept of intellectual stimulation in transformational leadership, which encourages individuals to think critically and innovatively. Trottier, Van Wart, and Wang (2008) state that transformational leaders in the public sector are capable of empowering employees to develop innovative solutions to service challenges. Additionally, Kane et al. (2015) emphasize that the success of digital transformation largely depends on leadership that fosters a culture of innovation within organizations.

However, the findings also reveal limitations in the implementation of innovation, particularly related to human resource readiness. This condition indicates that transformational leadership must be accompanied by efforts to develop employee competencies. Mergel et al. (2019) argue that one of the main challenges in public sector digital transformation is the lack of digital capacity among employees, which can hinder the effectiveness of innovation. Thus, leadership functions not only as a driver of innovation but also as a facilitator in enhancing employee competencies.

Moreover, changes in employee behavior toward being more responsive and communicative indicate the internalization of transformational leadership values in service practices. This is consistent with the concept of individualized consideration, where leaders pay attention to individual development, enabling employees to improve the quality of their interactions with the public. Goleman (1995) emphasizes that interpersonal skills, such as empathy and communication, are essential for success in the service sector. In the context of public services, these abilities contribute to increased public satisfaction.

These findings are also relevant to the service quality theory proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), particularly in the dimensions of responsiveness and empathy. Employees' responsiveness in delivering services and their ability to understand public needs indicate improvements in service quality influenced by transformational leadership. Research by Alawneh et al. (2013) also shows that digital-based service quality is strongly influenced by employees' ability to provide fast and responsive services.

However, the findings indicate that improvements in service quality are not yet fully optimal. Challenges such as system disruptions and limited employee competencies in using technology still persist. This suggests that digital transformation in public services continues to face structural and technical challenges. Heeks (2006) states that failures in e-government implementation are often caused by a mismatch between system design and actual conditions in the field. Therefore, the success of digital services depends not only on leadership but also on the readiness of infrastructure and supporting systems.

In addition, the findings regarding resistance to change among employees indicate that organizational transformation does not always proceed smoothly. Resistance to change is a common phenomenon in public organizations, particularly in response to technological change. Van Wart et al. (2017) emphasize that leadership in the digital era must be capable of managing resistance through adaptive and participatory approaches. In this regard, transformational leadership plays a role in building trust and encouraging employee engagement in the change process.

Furthermore, the findings reveal a gap between ideal conditions and actual practices in public services in the digital era. The ideal condition, which emphasizes fast, efficient, and technology-based services, has not yet been fully realized in practice. This indicates that digital

transformation is still in a transitional stage. Andrews, Boyne, and Walker (2011) argue that public organizational performance is strongly influenced by leadership quality in managing resources and organizational change. Thus, transformational leadership becomes a key factor in bridging this gap.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that transformational leadership plays a strategic role in improving public service quality in the digital era. Leadership functions not only as a policy director but also as a driver of change, a shaper of organizational culture, and a promoter of innovation. However, the effectiveness of such leadership is highly influenced by the readiness of human resources, technological system support, and the organization's ability to manage change sustainably.

Thus, it can be understood that improving public service quality in the digital era requires synergy between transformational leadership, organizational readiness, and optimal utilization of technology. Without proper integration of these three aspects, digital transformation will not produce a significant impact on public service quality.

4. Conclusion and Suggestion

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that transformational leadership plays a significant role in improving public service quality in the digital era. This role is reflected in leaders' ability to build a vision for digital transformation, encourage service innovation, and shape changes in employee behavior toward being more responsive and citizen-oriented.

Transformational leadership serves as the primary driver in the process of organizational change, particularly in guiding employees to adapt to digital-based service systems. Through consistent communication of vision and employee empowerment, leaders are able to instill more modern, adaptive, and innovative service values. This contributes to improvements in service quality, especially in terms of speed, accessibility, and efficiency.

However, the implementation of transformational leadership in improving public service quality in the digital era has not yet been fully optimal. This study identifies several challenges, including limited digital competencies among employees, resistance to change, and technical constraints within service systems. These conditions indicate that the success of digital transformation is not determined solely by leadership, but also by the readiness of human resources and the support of organizational infrastructure.

Thus, it can be concluded that transformational leadership is a key factor in enhancing public service quality in the digital era. However, its effectiveness largely depends on the synergy between leadership, employee readiness, and the support of systems and technology. Therefore, continuous efforts are needed to develop employee competencies, strengthen an adaptive organizational culture, and optimize digital systems in order to achieve high-quality, responsive, and citizen-oriented public services.

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